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《百种神秘感官》中的双重叙事

**Double Narrative in *The Hundred Secret Senses***

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## Abstract

The publication of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* brought Amy Tan great fame and made her a well-known American writer of Chinese ancestry. Till now, she has published five novels, one collection of essays and two children's books. These novels have won her so much popularity that some of them have even been adapted for TV programs and films. Her skillful writing stirs profound feeling in readers' inner world through simple but artful wording. Females, especially Chinese American females are the protagonists of her novels. Facing the oppression and pressure from the Western world and Oriental male world, these female Chinese Americans' living status and self-exploration becomes Amy Tan's focus of attention. She attempts to endow her Chinese American characters with authoritative narrative voice.

*The Hundred Secret Senses* is Amy Tan's third novel, which explores the sisterhood instead of mother-daughter relationship as she does in other novels. Opinions from critics are mixed. The ghost stories and superstitions presented in the novel trigger some negative comments and few critics have carried an in-depth and comprehensive study on it through the perspective of narratology.

Started in France in the 1960s, as an extension of structuralism, narratology quickly spread around the world and became an up-rising literary trend. As prestigious pioneers in narratology field, Gerald Genette and Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin extended the influence of narratology by deeply analyzing narrative discourse and narrative voice of text. Narrative theories put forward by Genette and Bakhtin are adopted in this thesis to make an analysis of double narrative in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. From this perspective, the profound meaning of bi-culture and bi-identity are explored thoroughly in the thesis to shed a new light on the identity issue of the Chinese Americans.

This thesis is divided into the following parts: the introduction part mainly gives a brief introduction about Chinese American literature and Amy Tan, a general review

on *The Hundred Secret Senses* as well as the motivation and methodology of this thesis. Chapter One introduces Amy Tan's life, literary achievement, literary reviews on her writing and especially on *The Hundred Secret Senses*; Chapter Two adopts Genette's theory of narrator and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel to analyze the two narrators and their respective narration; Chapter Three analyzes the double narrative levels of the novel through the perspective of Genette's meta-narrative theory. The conclusion part summarizes the thesis and explores the deep cultural and social meaning behind the double narrative, subliming and strengthening the gist of the thesis.

**Key Words:** Amy Tan; Double narrators; Double narrative levels; Identity-rebuilding

## 摘要

《喜福会》和《灶神娘娘》的面世使谭恩美跻身著名美国华裔作家之列。到目前为止，她共创作了五部小说，一部散文集和两本儿童读物。这些作品为她赢得了广泛的好评，她的部分作品还被改编为电影或者电视节目。谭恩美高超的写作技巧使得那些朴实简洁的文字在读者的心中激起了巨大的情感波涛。谭恩美的作品关注女性，特别是华裔女性的生存状况和自我探索。作为华裔美国女性，她们受到双重的影响和压迫：首先，她们是西方世界中的中国人，其次，她们是东方男性世界中的女性。谭恩美试图赋予华裔美国女性这个特殊群体以叙事话语权，让她们发出自己的声音。

《百种神秘感官》是谭恩美的第三部作品。与她的其他小说所探寻的主题有所不同的是，在这部作品中，姐妹亲情成了新的聚焦点。评论界对这部作品的评论也是褒贬不一，尤其是小说中出现的鬼故事和迷信等成了一些评论家批判的对象。虽然谭恩美的这部作品引起了评论界广泛的关注和多角度的评论，但是从叙事学的角度对其进行分析的评论文章依然不多。热奈特和巴赫金这两位叙事学家以对叙事文本的故事、话语以及叙事声音的深度剖析为据点开辟了叙事学的新疆土，使由结构主义思潮发展而来的叙事学，经由法国为轴心辐射至世界各地，成为文艺理论大家族中的后起之秀。本论文利用热奈特和巴赫金的叙事学理论分析探讨了《百种神秘感官》中的叙事双重性，并以此为切入点，深入分析了这一叙事双重性背后所蕴含的复杂深厚的双重文化、双重身份问题，从而对华裔这一特殊群体的身份归属与重建问题进行了观照。

本篇论文分为以下几个部分：引言部分简要介绍了华裔美国文学的发展状况和作者的简要情况，并对本论文的研究初衷和所采用的视角加以说明；论文主体部分由三章构成：第一章介绍了谭恩美的生平、作品以及对其作品的评论；第二章用热奈特的叙事者理论和巴赫金的复调小说理论分析了小说中的两位叙事者；第三章采用了热奈特的元故事叙事理论分析了小说的双重叙事层次。结尾部分在总结的基础上深入挖掘了小说中叙事双重性背后所蕴含的社会和文化意义，对论文的主旨进行了升华和拓深。

**关键词：**谭恩美；双重叙事者；双重叙事层；身份重建

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## Introduction

Though the earliest Chinese American work in English is *When I Was a Boy in China*, written by an oversea student named Lee Yanphou in 1887, the term Chinese American literature, attributing to the movement of democratic rights among the African Americans, started to bloom in the 1960s. The movement appealing for equal rights for African Americans also gave rise to a series of campaigns such as striving for women rights among the minorities. The literary creativity of Chinese Americans was also one of the most important results of those campaigns, and since then it has taken shape in the American literary arena.

Chinese Americans, as a marginal and oppressed group, were maltreated by the American government in history, especially in politics. In the nineteenth century, a large amount of Chinese people went to seek their fortunes in the United States, leaving their families and homes behind. Trying to earn their living or possibly making fortunes, they got jobs like railroad worker, gold-and-silver miner, dish-washer and so on. These Asian immigrants became the first to go through the racial discrimination in all aspects of life. They were not only rejected in terms of citizenship but also publicly humiliated or even physically attacked. Since the emergence of Lee Yanphou's autobiography, many Chinese Americans have been committed to doing literary creation about their own or other fellowmen's lives.

The first generation of Chinese Americans' toil provided comparatively better living conditions for the second generation. The second generation were born in the United States, quite a number of excellent writers emerged from them, trying to pick up pens to fight a way of life for themselves. Unlike their parental generation, who, as underdog, lived frugally for their whole lives, the second generation came to establish their own social circles and cultivate new values that were different from their parents. With the growth of the amount of second generation, the influences on American society brought by them increase. For the first generation of immigrants, no matter

coolies or from upper class they were, China is always their final home of affection. Especially when they were humiliated or abused in America, they would dream of returning home with glory and enjoying family happiness some day in future. This, more or less, became their driving force to fight a tough battle of survival abroad. For them, though China—motherland was far away, nothing could cut the emotional connection. The first generation of Chinese Americans regarded China as irreplaceable homeland and they held tightly their identity of being Chinese. By contrast, the second-generation Chinese Americans were in identity dilemma. Since they were born, raised in the United States with complete Americanized education, China means nothing to them but something strange and old-fashioned, something spoken out from parents' mouths from now and then. The heavy discriminatory environment forced them to strive to merge into American mainstream culture. This eager intention of being acknowledged by American society made many of the second-generation Chinese Americans sacrifice their ethnic identity. Being Americanized was the only way to enter into American mainstream.

Based on the foundation provided by the first generation, the second-generation Chinese Americans could set aside more time and energy for literary creation. Long-term accumulated achievement broadened their horizon and also enriched their writing material. Consequently, the most common theme of literary works of Chinese Americans in this period is celebrating self-made achievement as well as how to establish one's own social status and identity in American society. Writers from the second generation use personal experiences, family problems and the pursuit of American dream to reveal cultural conflicts between East and West. Personal experiences provide these writers abundant first-hand material, therefore autobiography is a common form of literary creation among the second generation. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, allowing significant numbers of Chinese men and women to enter the United States. The comparatively slack political environment helped to increase the output of Chinese American literary works. The representative works in this preparatory period were two autobiographies, *Father and Glorious Descendant* written by Pardee Lord in 1943 and *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

written by Jade Snow Wang in 1945. When it came to 1960s, the political environment became looser and generations' hard work eased their economic burden—all of these advantages created helpful conditions for these writers. After World War II, a new honesty and realism about Chinese American culture became more evident in the literary output of a number of writers. Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) attracted much attention and received a lot of compliments in critical field. The themes of fictions in this period anticipated the focus of Chinese American women writers, even Asian American women writers of the 1980s, in particular the debilitating effects of American racism and Chinese patriarchal culture on most Chinese American families. During this stage, fiction gradually became the main form of literary creation for Chinese American writers.

However, Chinese American literature did not exert the first significant influence on American mainstream consciousness until 1976, when Maxine Hong Kingston published her first novel *The Woman Warrior*. Her book was welcomed in literary circle. It was the first book by an Asian American to gain immense popular readership and acclaim. The novel is a semi-autobiographical treatment of conflicts and change within a Chinese American family. Kingston's novel constitutes an alternative system for organizing experience, an activity directly related to the inscription of identity. Kingston's success paved the way for the later younger writers, who consistently proved that Chinese American literature had strong resonance. The struggle between mother and daughter over bicultural issues revealed in Kingston's writing anticipated Amy Tan's work in the next decade. Among those following writers of the younger generation, Amy Tan is definitely an outstanding one, whose works appeals to so many readers that make her hold a notable position in Chinese American literature.

Amy Tan's first two novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) brought her tremendous success. Amy Tan's vivid and detailed description demonstrates the cultural dislocation of America's Chinese community. She describes an older generation of women who lived miserable lives in China and then accidentally, or on purpose, came to the United States. The relationship between the older generation of women and their American-born daughters is complicated and

sometimes even incompatible. The reason why mother-daughter relationship is the main theme of Amy Tan's most novels is related to her personal experiences. Her writing began to outpour continuously after she listened to her mother—Daisy Tan's story about her life in China. Through her mother's story telling, a world that had been deliberately blocked out was opened to Amy Tan. The Chinese heritage gradually became the focus of her works. Her mother's influence scattered everywhere in almost all of Amy Tan's writing. The daughters are confused by their Chinese heritage. They have adapted themselves to life in the United States and are frequently embarrassed by their mothers' poor English, clothes and customs. Chinese culture is transmitted by mothers intermittently through the way of traditional oral forms. What's more, Chinese myths and fables appear in the stories told by mothers. It is mothers' stories that bridged the gap between West and East and aroused reflection on the daughters. Amy Tan's writing is also influenced by other Asian American writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston. The western and Eastern narrative techniques are combined together to explore the lives of both Chinese and Chinese American in a nonlinear way, covering several centuries. Tan adopts "talk story"—a literary form that comes from ancient Chinese tradition of communication, to shuttle between dual cultures and dual countries and generations that are separated by time, space and language. Amy Tan usually organizes narration from a series of voices together to form a coherent and meaningful whole

Amy Tan's third work, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), instead of focusing on the mother-daughter bond, has slightly changed the theme this time to an exploration of sisterhood. The novel contains two narrators, Olivia and Kwan, they are half-sisters—the former is American-born Chinese and the later is Chinese. There is unhappiness easily sensed from Olivia's narration of her completely assimilated American lifestyle. Olivia's life and marriage dissatisfy her. By contrast, her older sister Kwan's narration, which has the rhythms of myth, fable and legend, is full of confidence and firmly rooted in her reminiscence of China and her love of Chinese culture. Although Olivia's narration takes up a larger proportion of the whole book, Kwan gradually takes over with her distinctive "talk story" blend of folktale, legend,

and history. Olivia ultimately realizes that the half sisters have a connection through their Chinese heritage that overweighs distinction.

What makes *The Hundred Secret Senses* different from Amy Tan's other novels is that this book is featured with double narrative. The thesis is about to analyze the double narrative through the perspective of narratology, to be more specific, by means of Genette's theories of narrator and meta-narrative as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel. Narratology took its shape around 1960s, occupying quite important position in the field of literary theory. It has been developed by French Structuralists, including Roland Barthes, A.J. Greimas, Claude Bremond and Gerard Genette. Though there is divergence about the definitions, there is still some truth in common. Namely, narratology is a theory about narrative texts, which emphasizes the technological analysis of narrative texts. At present, narratology has exceeded the bounds of a text, being used to explore the further meaning in culture, philosophy, sociology and so on. Though narratology has various approaches and branches, there are only a few critical methods adopted in this paper in order to explore deep understanding of this novel. First of all, there are two narrators in the novel. According to the definition of narrator in *A Dictionary of Narratology* written by Gerald Prince, narrator could be understood as

The one who narrates, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one narrator per narrative, located at the same diegetic level as the narratee he or she is addressing. In a given narrative, there may, of course, be several different narrators, each addressing in turn a different narratee or the same one. (1989: 65)

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, these two narrators belong to what Genette defines as *homodiegetic* narrator. Genette divides narrators into two types: the *heterodiegetic* narrator and the *homodiegetic* narrator. *Heterodiegetic* narrator refers to a kind of narrator whose function is telling the story without being a part of it. The story being told is someone else's. *Homodiegetic* narrator functions as a character in the story he or she tells. It means "same telling", since the story being told is the narrator's own. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, both Olivia and Kwan are *Homodiegetic* narrators.

Amy Tan uses two narrative voices to narrate the story—one is Olivia's narrative

voice, the other is Kwan's narrative voice. And these two narrative voices exert influences on each other. Olivia's narration is more like an exhibition of personal experiences while Kwan's narration brings readers to China more than a century ago, full of mysteries, legends and history. Their narration correct and complement each other, helping readers comprehend thoroughly what Amy Tan tries to convey. The two narrators' alternate voices lead the plot to climax bit by bit, leaving the truth to readers' own comprehension. Amy Tan grants Olivia and Kwan's voices narrative authority. The existence of dual narrative voices gives characteristics of polyphony to the novel. Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic novel is used in this thesis to probe the relationship between Olivia and Kwan's narrative voices. Their voices affect each other, bringing tremendous change to their lives. Compared with Kwan, Olivia's attitude toward life and her identity has been changed more. The influences from Kwan gradually take place through the form of dialogue. The contrasts and conflicts between two cultures and two independent voices are revealed through the dialogues and interrelationship of these two narrators. What's more, each voice narrates truth from its own point of view, which consequently creates polyphonic truth that contains more meaning than the sum of its parts.

Secondly, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia and Kwan finish their respective narration in their own narrative levels. Barry refers to Genette's theory of meta-narrative to "a narrative within the narrative" (2002: 236) in *Beginning Theory*. He claims that primary narrative just means the narrative which comes first, rather than the main narrative, which in fact isn't in most cases. The secondary narrative is the one which comes second and is embedded into the primary narrative. In this novel, Olivia's narration is the beginning of the book and Kwan's narration belongs to the secondary narrative level. Olivia's primary narrative mainly introduces the setting of the novel and the relationships between characters. Kwan's secondary narrative level shows her special abilities and the mysterious story happened a century ago in China. The second narrative level is embedded in a smart way. Kwan tells her story to Olivia and readers every night in her shared bedroom with Olivia. The secondary narrative is composed by bedtime story telling. Amy Tan's meta-narrative or embedded-narrative

makes the book more absorbing. Besides meta-narrative, Barry little further categorizes frame narratives as “single-ended”, “double-ended” and “intrusive” (2002: 236). If the embedded tale is finished without going back to the frame narrative, it is regarded as single-ended. The double-ended frame narrative, in contrast, refers to the case that the frame situation is re-introduced at the end of the embedded tale. Therefore, writers usually use the double frame to “give a kind of reinforcement to the thematics of the tale and the intrusive frame means that the embedded tale is occasionally interrupted to revert to the frame situation” (Genette, 1980: 236). *The Hundred Secret Senses* can be labeled both as double-ended frame narrative and intrusive frame narrative. In the novel, Olivia and Kwan’s narrative voices intersect each other, shifting from one space-time to another. Amy Tan’s usage of double-ended frame narrative serves as a justified reason to interpret Kwan’s final disappearance in the caves in Changmian, China in two ways: one is Kwan’s atonement for her unintentional mistake in last life and the other is that Kwan serves as the other lost half of Olivia. The narrative doubleness reflected in the novel conveys more meaning than the wording itself, which will be touched upon in the following chapters.

## Chapter One Amy Tan and Her Novels

### I Amy Tan's Life

Born in 1952 in Oakland, California, as the daughter of Daisy and John Tan who had both emigrated from China just a few years earlier like thousands of Asian Americans, Amy Tan went through her childhood by attempting to understand, to put up with and to reconcile the contradictions between her ethnicity and the dominant Western culture in which she was being raised and educated. Amy Tan's Chinese name, An-mei, means "blessing from America." Amy Tan is the second of three children. Her brother Peter was born in 1950 and her brother John in 1954. Being raised in a Chinese family provided her vivid but limited environment to learn Chinese culture and traditions while being born in the United States Americanized her and helped her observe Chinese culture distantly as an outsider.

She was aware at an early age of contradictions between her ethnicity and American culture. Her traditional Chinese parents expected her to become a neurosurgeon and a concert pianist. Tan felt uneasy balancing American lifestyles with more traditional Chinese customs. Her limited Chinese language skills and her parents' weak English added to the problem. Tan later expressed a painful awareness about her biculturalism. Speaking to Dorothy Wang of *Newsweek*, she recalled: "There was shame and self hate. There is this myth that America is a melting pot" (Tan, 1996). There is a story about her effort to Americanize herself to fit in American culture. When Amy Tan was a child, she pinched her nose with a clothespin for a week in the hope of heightening her nose so as to look more like an American. In a period, she even dreamed of changing her Asian appearance by a plastic surgery. In the depths of her heart, she felt ashamed of her parents' Chinese way of doing things. At the Christmas Eve when Amy was fourteen, her parents invited a Caucasian minister and his son to dinner. "Amy cried for she knew what they would judge her parents and her by the table manner of her relatives and by offering Chinese food like



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